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NSF awards $175,000 to University for Fort Union Coal Basin study

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NSF AWARDS $175,000 TO UNIVERSITY
FOR FORT UNION COAL BASIN STUDY

MISSOULA--

A grant of $175,000 for support of the project entitled "An Assessment of the Effects of Energy Development in the Fort Union Coal Basin, Montana and Neighboring States" has been awarded to the University of Montana in Missoula by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The project is under the direction of Dr. Arnold J. Silverman, professor of geology at UM.

The NSF grant, effective through Oct. 31, 1976, funds research that will attempt to develop baseline data about the Fort Union Coal Basin in eastern Montana. Rosebud and Big Horn Counties are the primary sites for the research, with additional work being done in Treasure, Custer and Powder River Counties.

According to Silverman, the research is designed to investigate current "real-world" problems rather than attempt to pose new questions. It is expected that the research will take several years to complete, but interim reports will be published.

The Fort Union research, which is being conducted by approximately 20 professors and graduate students from UM and Montana State University, Bozeman, is concentrating on the biophysical effects of coal development. The thrust of the research is aimed at accumulating factual information that will facilitate future decisions on coal mining and conversion. A smaller part of the research effort will be directed toward evaluating the socioeconomic effects of coal development in the Fort Union area.

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According to John McBride, administrative assistant to Silverman who helped draw up the research proposal, many decisions regarding coal development are "made in a void." He said, "The entire region needs the kind of information that will be coming out of our research." McBride said information obtained in the study will give "the people of Montana a better understanding of the problems of the Fort Union area and the alternatives for solving these problems."

Information gathered in the research is intended to provide a data base that will guide state legislators and federal and local government officials in making decisions on further coal development. The introduction to the research proposal submitted to the NSF states that contemporary public and private sectors of society "lack the substantive information base required for prudent judgments" concerning the coal resources of the Fort Union Basin. The study is designed to fill this gap by emphasizing applied rather than theoretical research.

Research in the coal basin study will consist of the following projects:

--Studying the effects of massive water withdrawals, diversions and consumption associated with current energy conversion technology.

--Surveying current land use in the areas to be affected by coal mining and conversion.

--Assembling an air-photo library of the area planned for coal mining and conversion.

--Making realistic projections on the amount of coal to be mined, converted and shipped from eastern Montana coalfields.

The research effort has been praised by Gov. Judge, who said, "I can think of no research more relevant or timely." A preliminary report on the research will be issued in October,with a final report to be filed April 30, 1976.

The NSF grant, coordinated by Silverman and McBride, has engendered a good deal of other research in the Fort Union Coal Basin. Large grants have been awarded to various individuals by the Energy Research and Development Agency and the Environmental Protection Agency.

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